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By Congressman Mike Quigley (IL-05)

U.S. Rep. Mike Quigley, a Chicago Democrat, delivered this speech in Congress on Tuesday:

Mr. Speaker, an American President once wrote a letter to the Senate Majority Leader, urging him to raise the debt ceiling. The President wrote, "the full consequences of a default, or even the serious prospect of default by the United States are impossible to predict and awesome to contemplate . . . Denigration of the full faith and credit of the United States would have substantial effects on the domestic financial markets and on the value of the dollar in exchange markets."

That president's name was Ronald Reagan, and the year was 1983. He closed his letter to Senate Majority Leader Howard Baker saying: "The risks, the costs, the disruptions and the incalculable damage lead me to but one conclusion: The Senate must pass this legislation before the Congress adjourns."

Watching the House floor 28 years later, you could be forgiven for being surprised Reagan would ever say such a thing. That's because the Reagan who gets referenced on the floor here is a myth, while the Reagan who wrote to Howard Baker urging pragmatism was a man. The real Ronald Reagan once said: "All of us have grown up accepting, with little question, certain images as accurate portraits of public figures. Some living, some dead. Seldom, if ever, do we ask if the images are true to the original."

In the year of his 100th birthday, the Great Communicator might be amazed at how far his own image has shifted from the original. He'd see his most dedicated followers using his name as justification for saying no to honoring our debts. He'd see his legacy used to play chicken with the world's greatest economic engine. But as Reagan often quoted John Adams, "facts are stubborn things."

The facts are these: President Reagan raised the debt ceiling 18 times. He took responsibility when the deep tax cuts of 1981 didn't produce the promised revenue. He worked with both

sides of the aisle to find a more sustainable balance. He worked with Tip O'Neill to shore up social security. He worked with my predecessor Dan Rostenkowski to reform the tax code and eliminate tax loopholes.

All of these actions would be condemned as tax increases by the purists who follow the image instead of the man. Image worship is a bipartisan disease. But we all do ourselves and our nation a disservice by distorting past images to justify present policies. As another American President John F. Kennedy once put it, "the greatest enemy of the truth is very often not the lie — deliberate, contrived and dishonest — but the myth — persistent, persuasive and unrealistic."

To say I disagreed with President Reagan on a number of things is an understatement. But the more I get to know the myth, the more I like the man. President Reagan was not a picture on the wall; he was President of the United States for two terms in office, and did his best to fulfill his sworn obligations.

We in Congress would do well to follow his lead and focus on what we can do during our short terms in office. Let's truly follow President Reagan's example and govern for the future, not a past that never existed. Instead of talking to portraits, let's talk to each other.